

**"THE PERMANENTLY REAL AMID THE
HISTORICALLY DOUBTFUL IN THE
MEANING OF LENT"**

A SERMON

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The church year is the record of a life from its entrance to its exit. It is the dramatization of one experience with this world, so essentially dramatic that for long it has been the chief subject for whatever form of portrayal was the mode in the century. Just now it is being filmed under the title, "The King of Kings." Those who thought it could not be done, that its appeal is gone, testify that they went to scoff and remained to pray.

Let us trace briefly the church year. If we do not observe it all, many of our neighbors do and we ought to know about it to understand what they are doing. We are now well into the story, almost midway. Since early December the churches have been moving through the events with Scripture, hymn, prayer, and anthem appropriate, with the color of altar cloth and priestly vestment grave or gay as befits. Four Sundays in Advent are the eager and the anticipating Sundays standing at the threshold of a grand surprise. Then comes Nativity Day, all those moods and ways that celebrate the advent of a child. This period is lighter and more gladsome. This is a festival of days up to

Twelfth Night from Christmas Day. Then comes Epiphany, January sixth, commemorating the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, the visit of the Wise Men, the baptismal scene and the Wedding Feast. Then comes the Lenten season, forty-six days before Easter, beginning on Ash Wednesday, which signifies just ashes, symbolic of fasting and mortification. Now a more somber and penitential note is struck, calling for conduct suitable to a graver scene, with all the appointments and observances more restrained. The "Hosannas" and "Joy to the World" quiet down to dirge and penitential psalm. Then come Palm Sunday, recalling the entrance into Jerusalem, then Holy Week, the week before Easter, then Good Friday, the crucifixion day, then Easter when the note of joy, held in restraint since Christmas, again breaks forth. Then forty days after Easter to Ascension Day, or Holy Thursday, then fifty days after Easter to Whitsunday, the white Sunday, connected in the minds of the faithful with baptism of those who believe all that has transpired thus far and accept the benefit made possible. Then twenty-eight Sundays, or fewer, and the year of wonder done and we are back again to December, to Advent, where we began.

Is this the story of your life and mine? Sometimes we dramatize what is just the probable and likely career of Everyman. Sometimes we dramatize a quality of

any person, as virtue or vice, as in the old morality plays. Sometimes we dramatize an imaginary or a symbolical, or even a mythological figure. The Greeks, we saw, dramatized their gods. Is this church year Everyman's life? What does the church think it is dramatizing here? Again we ask the question, does this purport to be your life and mine? Have we that added, vital, vivid, personal interest in the chief character of the church year because that is what each of us will go through before he is done? Some religionists say, "Yes, you have good reason to be interested in the church year round of life because that is just your fight and mine with the forces of this world. What this life went through you have to go through." They say that this is just an elder brother of Everyman. An elder brother is just the oldest of the same family, offspring of the same father and bearer of like inheritance. An example is a sample thing or person to which or to whose image one consciously shapes the thing or the life. There are religionists who speak of the great elder brother and the great example. Anyone who talks this way, and uses these terms advisedly, we may know believes that the story of the church year is the story of your life and mine. Most who go through the church year do not think of it in this way. They see all men, past, present, and to come, and this life, set forth in the church year, resembling theirs yet not quite of them, doing some-

thing for them all. He is a sacrifice. They say that this is not your biography, or mine, but His alone.

When we look at the church year we find two parts of it. One is history. It purports to be history. It says that if we had been there we could have seen these events happen on the earth. We ourselves should doubt that much of the church year is history. We should doubt that its chief events are history. We doubt if any church will be able successfully to convince the most intelligent people of the United States in the next one hundred years that it is history. We doubt if it can be told to India. We are sure that it cannot be told to China, and we know it cannot be told to Japan. We expect the church year to go on. We do not expect history to prove the historicity of its chief events. We expect the historicity of these events to be doubted more and more both on scientific and on historical grounds. There is all that happened to Elizabeth and Mary, the prelude to the Nativity, all that goes with the Christmas story, the resurrection, and the ascension. There is all that is the purported historical part. This is one part of the church year, the story of what happened at a time, in a place.

Is that the strength of the church year? We expect it to go on through our generation. It may go on for many generations. We do not expect the part of its chief character as a sacrifice for the world to be increas-

ingly believed. We expect it to be increasingly doubted. This sacrifice idea is entirely foreign to our life. To our time it is intellectually difficult, logically inconceivable, morally reprehensible, and aesthetically repugnant. This went out, goes out, with the conception of the God that required it.

But the chances of the church year staying on, after its chief events are no longer viewed as history, we should think quite as good as are the chances of Shakespeare's plays staying on though the historians should discover that these characters are all unhistorical. How much less would the Henry trilogy mean to us if it should be discovered that Shakespeare got the Henry's mixed, that these Henry's in the plays do not do what the Henry's in true history did, or that there were no Henry's at all at that time in English life. It would make no essential difference. Indeed the plays that are wholly mythological, and admittedly so, hold their own quite as well as those that purport to be accurately historical. Shakespeare can play around on the page or on the stage with certain deep problems of life, circumstance and human destiny, and he can do it quite as well without his characters having been in history at all or having acted just that way. Only the more concrete minded would be affected by Shakespeare's historical fidelity to men and events being challenged. In like manner we suppose that only the very concrete minded

will be affected by the historical events in the church year coming to be doubted. But in religion those thus minded happen to be the larger number, those who have to have a material basis for their spiritual hopes and concrete history for their articles of faith. It was about such that Jesus despaired and withdrew his teaching to the inner circle.

But running through the church year, hiding back of these events, with which historians and scientists claim the right to deal, and which they claim the right to doubt, is an idea. We meet it in the first act of the first scene; we meet it all through; we meet it in the final act of all. If we were going to represent the drama of the church year, we should have one solid and one filmy, phantom figure. The moving picture industry has made us familiar with these by its photographic art and optical tricks. There is a solid figure of our world which we all understand. Then there comes on, and fades off, this phantom figure which hovers about. It does not obscure the other figure for we can see right through the phantom figure. This church year is the interplay of these two figures, the gross, solid, material, visible, weighable, divisible body of man, and the intangible, immaterial, filmy, phantom part. It is mind, spirit, soul, about which we do not know so much. The church year is the interplay of these two figures, the solid and the phantom one on the visible stage, in a

country, at a time. Your life and mine is the smaller stage on which these same two figures interplay, and how they interplay makes all the riddles of the world. All the great problems and the unsolved ones are here. How the solid and the phantom part get on together is the question involved when we wonder what is the partnership between matter and life, brain and thought. The difference between the physiologist and the psychologist, the differences among the healers and the philosophers, between the scientist and the religionist, all these differences are centered here.

The church year is a series of surprises, for we look for the event to come out one way and it does not. The birth is not as we should expect. Some strange and unseen factor wins in feeding the five thousand with what was enough only for a small company ; in the water made wine ; in sight restored ; the sick healed ; the lame made to walk ; even it is said in the dead restored. It wins in the resurrection and the ascension scenes. We are not looking for the phantom, spirit part here to lift life from the grave and then from the earth. The church year dramatizes an idea. It takes a part of reality, puts it into a life, carries it through and represents that idea and that part of life as winning out.

The church year does have in it some very unusual history, and many doubt this history all the way from the birth to the ascension scenes. They do not doubt it

because it is unintelligible or too wonderful to happen. The Virgin birth can hardly be doubted on the ground of its irrationality or unintelligibility. We should have to doubt our own birth on the same ground, for it is quite as unintelligible. We have so much that we know practically nothing about, that it seems straining out the gnat to balk now at a little New Testament miracle, which we cannot understand, and swallow all the camels, a hundred wonders of our life, which we cannot understand any better.

We find ourselves at present not knowing the relation between life and matter. Indeed we do not know what either life is or matter is, and it is not likely that we are going to know just what the relation is between these two about neither of which we know enough to know what it is. We do not know the relation between our bodies and life itself, or between our brains and our thought. We think we have two tenants in our house of life, the solid part and something else. We do not know just how our tenants live together when we are alive, or what has happened between them when we are asleep, or tired, or sick, or when we die. There is much discussion about how the two parts of us can get along when we are dead. We are quite as much in the dark about how they get along while we are alive. On grounds of unintelligibility, our death is no more beyond us than our life is. If we do not see how we

could exist dead, we do not see any better how we do exist alive. The things that are unintelligible in the church year are just a relatively small part now of a growing world of things not intelligible to us. We do not doubt the church year so much because we cannot see how it could happen. We do not see any better how an increasing number of things can happen. Only one in a thousand can see how most things happen and this one says that he really does not know much about it. When a man stands in ignorance and in awe before just bending his finger, as he will if he knows enough to know how much he does not know about it, that person is not going to get very much excited about a New Testament miracle.

This is not to say that he is going to believe all the events of the church year. We ourselves doubt them, but we doubt them on other grounds than their impossibility in a world such as this. Presumably the laws of the solid part and the phantom part are under the same director who gave each its rules and bounds. We do know something about the rules for the solid part of us and of the world. The difficulty with these events of the church year is that they do not observe the rules that we know that flesh and matter kept before New Testament times and after. The two parts of reality are equally parts of God's reality, but they cannot be in a state of anarchy. We do not know all the rules of

either part, or just the line between them, but the New Testament events do not keep to the rules that we know, and that is why we doubt them.

The Lenten season is just an interlude in the year's events. It is leading up to the final testing of these two parts of life and man. The solid part with its laws is bringing him to dissolution, decay, annihilation, and these laws of the solid part do just this. The other laws, of this filmy, phantom spirit of man, grapple with these laws to bring a part of him through to life and victory. The church year is the play of two forces for the mastery of man. These two forces are in the world and in every man. The drama of the church year personalizes these laws in Everyman's life, lets the forces play, lets each put forth its full powers to win this man, the central figure, then lets one part of him emerge victor in the final test. This is the idea back of the church year: one part can strive, and, after that striving, win, after the other part has had its day.

Now the Lenten period is just emphasizing what may be reasonably inferred. If one part wins in the final contest, in the last great victory, it may be presumed that these two parts are always striving for the mastery of the man. There must be little contests between these two parts of man all along the way, little victories all through life between them. One might throw certain advantage, if he would, to one part or the other all

through his life, and make the final victory easier and surer. Lent is but recalling this undoubted fact for a short time, that one part of our life might be helped, clarified, by consciously checking the grosser part for a little time, or all the time. The usual expression of it is temperance, which gives the normal, balanced life. Then there are those who serve too much the grosser part, in excess, gluttony, lust, carnality. These are slaves to the solid part which is sovereign over them. Others go as far to the other side in fastings, in ascetic practices, in denying the sovereignty over them of the solid part of matter and of flesh. They always have testified to their ample reward. Their life, they say, became more abounding as they got out of the bondage of the body part. In fastings often they have found they have clarity of thought, of vision, of spiritual insight, whatever it is we call that within us by which we get evidence of a reality not brought to us by eye and ear and touch. Many pursuing such a path, for different reasons, have given their witness to a clearing up, a removing of wall and veil when they practiced such ways.

Many all through the centuries have practiced voluntarily, and to a great degree, all that the Lenten practices require in a small degree. We all know those who have done it for various reasons and they testify to an increasing clarity of thought, to a certain lifting up of their inner life which seems to feel a dead weight fall

off and something break through to new freedom never felt before. The idea which makes the Lenten practices is that one can be the manipulator of his own life, two planed and double functioning as it is. He can throw the weight of his directorship to help one or the other of the two contestants which every one can feel he has striving within him, his life their field of contest and their battleground. And one has but to look at the saint and then at the sensualist to see how great the difference whether one wins or the other.

The permanently real amid the historically doubtful in Lent, as in all the church year, is an idea that will not down, though knowledge challenge all the events. It is that something is our soul and center, under laws of its own, and that it emerges undefeated from this final contest of life in which the grosser part of us goes down defeated to the dust. We do not care for the history in which it is said to be embodied. We do not care especially for the events that are said to prove it true. As far as we are concerned it could be represented by a mythological figure or a symbolical one. We should ourselves be just as sure of it if it were told in a poem as in purported historical events. All the history of the past could be proven false, and all the characters fictitious, and it would not touch the idea for us in the least. It is this idea which gives our life all the meaning that it has. It is only this idea of something unseen woven

through the seen that gives us any clue to how all lives,
moves and has its being. We have to invoke this part
to explain anything. We have to believe it to be living
either while we live or to be living when we are dead.
It saves all our hopes from being dupes.

